

## VERSE, CURSED: DOUBLE DACTYLIC SACRILEGE

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As all card-carrying recreational linguists know, the double dactyl is a serious light verse form comprising two quatrains, with each line—except the final, rhyming lines of the quatrains—consisting of two dactylic feet, and in which the first line must be a nonsense reduplication; the second line a proper name; and the penultimate or antepenultimate line one double dactylic word. (For complete rules, origins, scholarship and numerous cerebral examples, see *Jiggery Pokery* by the form's inventors, Anthony Hecht and John Hollander, Atheneum, 1983.)

From the book, here is an elegant example by Hollander:

**Higgledy-piggledy,  
Benjamin Harrison,  
Twenty-third President,  
Was, and, as such,**

**Served between Clevelands, and  
Save for this trivial  
Idiosyncrasy,  
Didn't do much.**

Constructing a double dactyl was an occasional challenge in the long-running, but now defunct, Competition in *New York* magazine. Several of my own efforts appeared in that venue, including the following specimen, published in the April 20, 1981 issue.

Oh, just in case you've forgotten: Tertullian, born in Carthage c. 160 A.D., was a pagan who enthusiastically converted to Christianity, becoming a priest, theologian and prolific writer whose works are still read. Asked how he could accept the resurrection of Christ, he apocryphally replied: "*Credo quia absurdum*" (I believe it because it is absurd). Admirers continue to insist that this is a misquotation, but for our purposes such controversy is irrelevant.

**Higgelus-piggelus,  
Father Tertullian  
Said, "It's impossible.  
Thus, it is true."**

**To this day, bureaucrats  
Characteristically  
Follow such reasoning.  
What else is new?**



That submission, with its irreverent allusion to Christian doctrine, garnered a mere Honorable Mention. Coincidentally, in the same Competition, a Mr. Alex Vaughn captured First Prize for his entry, which has a similarly profane theme:

**Higgledy-piggledy,  
Jesus of Nazareth  
(Parables, miracles,  
All of that jazz)**

**Came to us courtesy  
Parthenogenesis.  
Medical annals say  
No one else has.**

A month later, in the May 18 issue, the magazine's letters column contained the following rant:

"I fail to see anything funny about the name Jesus of Nazareth, and I think that anyone who does is either ignorant or an imbecile.... I consider the drivel and its publication and its being awarded a prize an intentional insult to my own religious beliefs, or at the very least an expression of unbelievably bad taste."

Hmm, I thought, how did my own semi-heretical swipe escape his fury? The above tirade was signed: "The Reverend Richard A. Chichester."

What a setup! The temptation was impossible to resist. I composed this reply:

**Blasphemy-phlasphemy,  
Richard A. Chichester.  
Temper thy anger, O  
Man of the cloth.**

**"Turn other cheek," He said,  
Epigrammatically.  
Would He then bless you for  
Waxing so wroth?**

Although the Competition's moderator loved the rebuttal, the magazine's editors—perhaps anxious to extricate themselves from a thorny situation (the irascible clergyman's letter bore the obsequious headline "No Offense Intended")—declined to publish the verse. It appears in print here for the first time.

Finally, as a matter of honesty and full disclosure, I should note that the witty riposte was a collaborative effort between me and my then soon-to-be former erstwhile quondam ex-wife. Wherever she is today, she can't accuse me of appropriating all the credit.